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ABSTRACT

Ways in which leading child-centered progressives have transformed Dewey's educational philosophy into a self-perpetuating false ideology of education are examined in this paper, which focuses on how Dewey's principles of "interaction" and "community" were distorted in defining "educative experiences." The progressives' misinterpretation may stem from a failure to understand the concept of "starting with the child," which resulted in the exclusion of traditional subject matter. A paradox is that overemphasis on the child limited the child. A learning-centered school with a neo-Deweyan philosophy is proposed, which stresses connection between the subject matter and child, between knowing and not knowing, and which incorporates students into a self-perpetuating learning process. (36 references) (LMI)

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AERA Roundtable Presentation, Boston, 1990

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The child-centered progressive movement, which promoted the philosophy of education that prevailed amongst educational innovators during the 1920s and 1930s, historically has identified with John Dewey and has prided itself on implementing his philosophy. Many of today's progressive educators continue to identify with the child-centered progressives. But there are major discrepancies between child-centered progressive educational practices and Dewey's philosophy of education. Not only did the progressives misunderstand Dewey, as Byrns (1935) stated in a review of Experience and Education, but if they had understood him, they would have objected strenuously to his theory of experience. Furthermore, the practices implemented under the banner of progressivism were according to Dewey himself "mis-educative" (Dewey, 1938; Bode, 1938).

I will argue that many of the child-centered progressives turned Dewey's philosophy into a blind ideology which left its imprint on the field of education. Above all, they distorted Dewey's focus on the principles of "interaction" and "continuity" in defining "educative experiences." Alarmingly, the false ideology of education has become self-perpetuating.

Traditional educators believed that children should be given access to the inherited knowledge of the culture by being taught to memorize facts and by being urged to learn by rote methods. But this approach to education, many felt, was blind to the child's nature. The child-centered groups rebelled against the traditional approach to education by arguing that curriculum should account for the child's traits and needs. The phrase "child-centered" refers to a variety of educational philosophies and practices: first, Kilpatrick and his followers believed that subject matter should be used only as the child needs it to carry out a project; second, Rugg and his followers set the child's level of development within the context of society by emphasizing the importance of redistributing traditional subject matter into pre-planned units; and third, romantics, like Pratt, believed that the curriculum should directly respond to the immediate needs and creative impulses of the child. Though Dewey too stressed the child, the child-centered progessives tipped the paradigm toward the child frequently to the exclusion of traditional subject matter. The child-centered progressives contradicted their own goals when translating philosphy into practice. They intended to nurture learning in the child but their own practices often sabotaged their good intention. In this paper I will examine the philosophies and practices of some of the leading child-centered progressive educators in light of Dewey's theory of experience in order to demonstrate how "child-centered" theory and practice may not only be self-contradictory but also "mis-educative."[1]

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[1]Although the scientific progressives considered their adjusting instruction to the child's pace of learning to be child-centered, their emphasis on creating an efficient system was not necessarily child-centered.

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In Experience and Education Dewey (1938) argued that "educative" experiences are rooted in continuity and interaction (which he later referred to as "transaction"). The first principle of Dewey's theory of experience, continuity, helps the teacher to discriminate between experiences that are "educative" and "mis-educative." Children do not learn when teachers fail to help them make connections between their past, present, and future experiences. In order to do this, teachers must reach back to the body of inherited knowledge while linking the lessons of the past to present societal concerns; teachers must also help children link personal past experiences with their present experiences. Only by integrating past and present can we expand opportunities for future growth. Although Dewey never precisely defines the endpoint of "growth," he does explain that continuity is an essential ingredient of growth, necessary for "educative" experiences and that growth is one example of continuity.

For Dewey (1916, 1938), lessons without connections between the past, present, and future limit the educational value of experience and are, therefore, mis-educative. For example, today there is much debate about how to use computers in the classroom. Teaching a child by using mechanical computer games succeeds only in teaching the child to react to repeated patterns of stimuli. Consequently, children are taught to passively react; they are not taught how to think. On the other hand, computer software which requires the child to actively engage in learning fosters a kind of growth which creates further growth. For the child to connect past with present experiences, the teacher must actively link society's inherited knowledge to present concerns. But continuity alone is not enough. For Dewey, the teacher must strive for the active intersection of continuity and interaction which is necessary for "educative experiences."

Dewey's second principle, interaction, defines "educative" experiences by requiring "equal rights" for the subjective (child) and the objective (society) parts of experience. He stresses that if traditional educators emphasized subject matter at the expense of the child, child-centered progressive educators emphasized the child at the expense of the subject matter. Dewey (1916, 1930, 1938) criticized both the traditionalists and the progressives for not balancing the needs of the child (traits, abilities, interests, and experience) with the demands of society (inherited knowledge, cultural values, and contemporary issues). Only the continual interaction between organized "logical" subject matter and the "psychological" interests, traits, and experiences of the child can ensure growth (Dewey, 1897).

Dewey was careful to strike a balance between subject matter knowledge inherited from society and the needs and traits of the child, a balance between the teacher's control over fixed subject matter and the child's expression of impulses. For some children there may be nothing immediately meaningful about the Civil War. But when teachers juxtapose Frederick Douglass' Independence Day Speech at Rochester with Martin Luther King Jr.'s The March on Washington Address ("I Have A Dream"), the abstract concepts of freedom become more real for the child. Teachers can inspire the active engagement of the child with the subject matter by "psychologizing" subject matter. In Dewey's theory of experience, for every "educative" experience, the interaction of child and society intersects with the continuity of past, present, and future experience.

Some followers of Dewey thought they were implementing Dewey's educational ideas but, in fact, they were not. One such disciple of Dewey, William Heard Kilpatrick (1922) of Teachers College Columbia University, became famous for his "project method." Kilpatrick described the "project method" as a way for children to live out a "wholehearted purposeful

activity in a social environment." Kilpatrick believed that children should always have a purpose for every activity and that it was the responsibility of the teacher to make the purpose clear. Kilpatrick (1922) justified his project method largely by invoking Thorndike's laws of learning, especially the law of effect, which asserted that connections between stimuli and responses are strengthened or weakened by the child's satisfaction or displeasure. Thus, the teacher's approach must secure the pupil's satisfaction and purpose in each step of a project. By keeping the purpose of the project in mind, the student will be better able to plan, experiment, and problem solve.

Apart from a few inconsistencies in Kilpatrick's method, there is a fundamental contradiction at the heart of his theory: Kilpatrick thought he was Deweyan by emphasizing the child but his overemphasis on the child contradicted Dewey's continuity and interaction by underemphasizing subject matter.[2]

Kilpatrick opposed setting out subject matter in advance because he believed it would stifle the creativity of the child (Cremin, 1961). To take one example, Kilpatrick (1926) tells us that when a boy learns to plant corn, he learns better by solving the problem himself, rather than relying on knowledge attained from books or subject matter set out in advance: but as Cremin (1961) perceptively notes, Kilpatrick's "unrelenting attack on subject matter 'fixed-in-advance'... inevitably shifts the balance of Dewey's pedagogical paradigm toward the child. Kilpatrick believed that the child learns by doing but he stretched that to mean that "the child must come before the subject matter" (p. 31). Kilpatrick treated logically organized subject matter as if it were an evil to be scourged. As Wirth (1966) suggests, the child received "the lion's share of attention" even though Dewey (1938) aimed the child toward logical subject matter. Kilpatrick's overemphasis of the child reflected a fundamental misunderstanding of Dewey.

Kilpatrick's child-centered emphasis, which came to dominate the progressive education movement (Cremin, 1961), "calls to mind the very position Dewey himself rejected..." (p.220). Kilpatrick's (1922, 1926, 1931, 1936) bias toward the child devalues the integration of inherited knowledge with the child's everyday experiences that Dewey emphasized so much. Kilpatrick's student is thus deprived of opportunities in which inherited knowledge becomes personalized and internalized so that growth becomes self-generating. Kilpatrick eliminates the key that enables students to achieve self-generating growth; he made it difficult for teachers to create contexts for continuous learning. Bagley (1935), a major critic outside the progressive movement, faulted Kilpatrick for ruling out any systematic study of educational values embedded in the cultural heritage; students need to use knowledge for background information (Bagley, 1935) for it is this background that aids in the acquisition of new knowledge. By overemphasizing the child, Kilpatrick's method ended up limiting how much the child can learn.

Today, cognitive psychologists use the concept of "schema" to describe the connection between self-generating growth and how an individual organizes knowledge of the world. Children are better able to understand the importance of new factual material when teachers

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[2]Another inconsistency in the implementation of his theory is evident: Kilpatrick (1926) theorized that first-hand experience is the building block of every learning experience but he contradicted himself by stating that second-hand experience was to be allowed if first-hand experience was too costly or time-consuming (Bode, 1927).

help them to fit facts into basic theoretical frameworks (Sclan, 1990). Bransford (1984) argues that the teacher should not only help children to reassemble pre-existing "packets of knowledge," but should also encourage them to construct new schema. Only in this manner can we teach children to teach themselves; only thus may teaching become a form of empowerment.

In sharp contrast with Dewey's emphasis on self-generating growth, Kilpatrick's tendency to create unnecessary dualisms between the child and curriculum has the effect of perpetuating limited growth. By opposing book learning to learning by doing, past knowledge to present knowledge, Kilpatrick undercuts the Deweyan principles of interaction and continuity. Surely, requiring the child to reinvent the wheel at every turn will guarantee mis-educative experiences.

It is clear why the progressives reacted against the traditional educators who erred by neglecting the child's nature. But Kilpatrick went too far by neglecting the value of the traditional disciplines. On the clash between Dewey's and Kilpatrick's theories, Cremin (1988) concludes that "it was not merely that good theory was not always effected in practice, it is also that good theory was frequently pre-empted by bad theory" (p. 240). Not surprisingly, Greene (1966) observes, in 1938 Dewey dissociated himself from many of the progressive practices. Indeed, she claims that Kilpatrick's project method should not be considered as part of the Deweyan tradition. For Kilpatrick, the teacher had a responsibility to direct the children's purposes but he believed that child spontaneity should direct the subject matter to be included in the curriculum. Kilpatrick and the child-centered progressives only paid lip service to the ongoing processes of continuity and interaction: they erred by believing that a laissez faire approach to teaching would achieve a genuine spontaneity of thinking in the students. By contrast, Dewey (1916, 1938) viewed the classroom as an arena where continuity and interaction merge, where it is impossible to separate them, a "twilight zone of inquiry" where continuity and interaction foster and nurture "educative" experiences.

Although the project method was used in his own lab school, Dewey (1931) did not endorse it "as the sole way out of educational confusion." Instead, Dewey's lab school teachers were encouraged to create a balance between the child and the society (Mayhew and Edwards, 1936) by incorporating a responsiveness to the children's needs with the subject matter. Teachers should arrange for experiences that are "more than immediately enjoyable," that lead to future educative experiences (Dewey, 1938), that lead the child to "the cumulative experience of the race" (Cremin, 1961). The project method, on the other hand, encourages teachers to use subject matter only as needed to successfully complete the project. Thus, learning becomes a "hit-and-miss affair" when teachers rely solely on the project method (Bode, 1927). Though Kilpatrick (1922) criticized those who reacted against traditional education by humoring "childish whims," his call to use subject matter only as needed had the same effect of tipping Dewey's paradigm decisively toward the child. The project method eclipsed the more subtle relationship between the experience of the child and the content of the subjects that Dewey (1902, 1938) stressed as crucial to educative experience (Cremin, 1988). Education was an end unto itself for Dewey; "the child was an end unto itself to Kilpatrick" (Childs, 1956).

By the 1930s, the "project method" mushroomed into the "activity curriculum" which was mainly associated with elementary schools. Activity curriuclum leaders reacted against the traditional education and to increasing calls for reform to make the curriculum more responsive to the child. "Activity curriculum" was used to describe different elementary curricula: where some referred to unplanned experiences, most schools defined the activity curriculum as planned

subject matter based upon the child's nature and experiences. Those who created planned activiy curricula pushed for a radical redefinition of traditional subject matter, re-distributing the traditional organization of subject matter into integrated "units": instead of learning math, reading, or science lessons, the child would study a larger unit on transportation, for example, that integrates all the disciplines and is based on everyday experiences of the child.

They believed that the curriculum must be more responsive to the developmental needs of the children. The units were largely based on familiar experiences in the children's everyday lives; but despite the best of intentions, the activity curriculum units did not necessarily respond to individual children's needs on a day-to-day basis and in addition they often limited the introduction of new knowledge. While activity curriculum developers paid more attention to the importance of planning out subject matter than did Kilpatrick, planning units in advance frequently became as rigid and arbitrary a practice as the traditional methods. One activity curriculum leader, Ruby Minor (1929), director of Kindergarten and Elementary Education in Berkeley, California, claimed that redistributing subject matter enabled teachers to respond to the child's traits, interests, and needs. That is, she advocated what Dewey (1897) called "psychologizing" the subject matter. But units that were psychologized for children were often limiting in subject matter. By failing to recognize the reciprocal relationship between "interaction" and "continuity," the activity curriculum leaders may even have restricted what children could learn.

Harold Rugg, Director of Research at Teachers College's Lincoln School, took Kilpatrick's project method a step further in developing a program which was closely related to the activity curriculum. Rugg believed in the importance of reorganizing the traditional disciplines because he felt that it was only by being made aware of the immediate relevance of contemporary social issues that inherited knowledge could become meaningful for children. While lower-grade students concentrated on immediate life interests, students in the upper-grades studied contemporary problems so that these problems could become a relevant part of their lives. He abolished boundaries between history, geography, civics, economics, and sociology by grouping them all into all-encompassing social studies units. Culture was no longer divided into history or geography but was divided into Rugg's (1941) three categories: the external civilization (economic system), the social institutions, and the underlying psychology of the people. Rugg tried connect child and society in the curriculum.

The Lincoln School's curriculum reflected Rugg's belief that traditional subject matter should be reorganized and planned out, as opposed to the idea that curriculum should solely emerge from spontaneous experiences of the child. That the Lincoln School had such a lasting influence on the subsequent history of American education (Cremin, 1961) testifies to the fact that educators saw much of value in Rugg's more societal oriented curriculum-making, which comes closer than any other child-centered school to achieving the critical balance between between child and society that Dewey saw as essential to an educated experience. But while Rugg included cultural content in the curriculum, he over-emphasized the importance of the immediate present in the learning process. When the content of the subject matter does not reflect the subtle interaction between past and present experience, teachers cannot foster a sense of continuity in the child.

Whereas Rugg tried to balance child and society in reforming the curriculum, others, in reaction to traditional assumptions about teaching focused exclusively on the child. They

believed that a curriculum that emphasizes traditional subject matter prevented the child from learning because it does not include aspects of the child's nature. Deriving many of their ideas from Rousseau's views on human nature, they tended to see the child as sacred. There was little place in their romantic child-centered schools' primary curricula for traditional school subjects because they believed the traditional subject matter ignored the child's needs (Rugg and Shumaker, 1928). More than any of the child-centered lab schools, Meriam's lab school at the University of Missouri developed a curriculum that emerged spontaneously from the child's everyday experiences. But, as Cremin (1961, p. 207) claims, the romantics failed to distinguish among fundamental ideas: "...license began to pass for liberty, planlessness for spontaneity, recalcitrance for individuality, obfuscation for art, and chaos for education--all justified in the rhetoric of expressionism" (Cremin, 1961, p. 207). And their mistaking of anarchy for freedom only fed a spirit of anti-intellectualism (Geiger, 1958, p. 192). Dewey (1926) elaborated further: "there is a present tendency in so-called advanced schools of educational thought...[to] surround pupils with certain materials...and then let pupils respond to these things according to their own desires...Now such a method is really stupid; and it misconceives the conditions of independent thinking" (p. 37). By mis-understanding the fundamental conditions of independent thinking, the romantic child-centered leaders discouraged the conditions necessary for "interaction" and "continuity."

Rugg himself and Shumaker (1928) praised the child-centered schools for attending to the child's needs, but they pointed to the fact that children were not taught to think systematically and teachers were not expected to use subject matter in a sequential way. A sequential curriculum takes into account the necessary steps toward increasingly more complex and independent tasks that children are expected to master. Instead, materials were provided and the children were expected to do the rest. Children became frustrated when it took an inordinate amount of time to complete their projects because they acquired information in a haphazard way. The romantic child-centered schools made the interests of the child the "ultimate standard for school work" (Dewey, 1897) but ultimately their curricula limited the child's access to knowledge and ability to think independently.

Perhaps one of the worst offenders of what Rugg and Shumaker criticized was Caroline Pratt's Play School (later named the City and Country Day School) which epitomized the romantic child-centered school of the early twentieth century (Antler, 1987). She attacked those who forgot the child's place in the educative process. Pratt articulated the importance for educators to remember to include the child in curriculum planning, but she emphasized the child's interests so much that it dominated the whole curriculum. In addition, she overemphasized the mechanics of teaching which often displaced the use of inherited knowledge in the curriculum. Pratt (1930) believed that children learn mainly by working with concepts from their everyday experiences and, therefore, teaching meant using familiar subject matter. She wrote that "The old conception [of education] is that life reveals itself in books. The new conception is that life reveals itself in life" (Pratt, 1930, p. 8). She believed that for children to study history was meaningless because history was "irrelevant to present day concerns" (Antler, 1987, p. 301). But effectively this led to the exclusion of traditional subject matter from the Play School's curriculum. When learning is limited to the material of everyday experience, interaction between child and new knowledge is not possible. Like Kilpatrick, she opposed the child to subject matter. Pratt viewed traditional subject matter as the "enemy" of the child. Pratt stated that:

> when subject matter dominates a curriculum, habits of acceptance of other people's opinions are formed, and memorizing becomes the functioning quality...the more and the longer the children are exposed to a subject matter program, the less they are capable of making use of opportunities for experience. (p. 175)

Pratt essentially divorced the child from the traditional disciplines. She drove a wedge between the child's thinking skills (what she called "growth habits") and subject matter. But Dewey stressed the interaction between everyday experiences and subject matter.

In the romantic child-centered schools children were not given enough guidance or structure and because they did not have access to traditional subject matter that could make everyday experiences more meaningful, they were limited in what they could learn. Fostering structured relationships between children and teachers is one aspect of structured teaching situations, also essential for learning. For all that Pratt tried to rebel against traditional practices, she actually fostered practices that limited the subject matter and restricted the conditions which encourage learning.

Romantics like Pratt believed that designing a curriculum based on traditional subject matter interferes with the child's process of learning. But Dewey's (1930, 1938) repudiation of the romantics' practices made it clear that their rejection of the traditional education was much too extreme. By contrast to the romantics' laissez faire approaches, he believed that teachers should structure the environment so that children can learn. Furthermore, he suggested that teachers also provide guidance for constructive social interaction:

> many of the newer schools tend to make little or nothing of organized subject-matter of study; to process as if any form of direction and guidance by adults were an invasion of individual freedom, and as if the idea that education should be concerned with the present and the future meant that acquaintance with the past has little or no role to play in education (Dewey, 1938, p. 22).

Dewey (1938, p. 60) observed that "a failure to learn one of the most important lessons of life, that of mutual accommodation and adaptation," as illustrated by the rude manners of many children in the child-centered schools, blocks communication.

Pratt and the romantic child-centered progressives based their practices on a rejection of traditional education rather than affirming a new philosophy (Dewey, 1938). The romantic child-centered practices, rooted in the rejection of rigid traditional content and of authoritarian methods, became equally mis-educative as the traditional practices.

Dewey's call to "start with the child" has thus been interpreted in various ways. The child-centered educators, especially the romantics, believed that children's everyday experience should be the main criterion for subject matter selection. But as Dewey stressed, where the child's impulses certainly supply momentum for learning, it is the subject matter that provides direction for learning. Teachers should not separate children's experiences and inherited subject matter because both designate different aspects of the same learning process (Dewey, 1956); the separation occurs when the teacher over-emphasizes either traditional subject matter or the child' nature. The child-centered progressives' perspective did not account for interaction between child and subject matter and continuity between past and present and future.

The progressives' misinterpretation of Dewey may stem from their failure to understand what Dewey meant by "starting with the child." For Dewey, "starting with the child" incorporates how the child thinks with what the child knows. During the progressive era, prior to mid-century advances in developmental psychology, how the child thinks was not as clearly distinguishable from what the child knows. The difficulty lay in understanding what Dewey meant by the "known." To avoid repeating the mistakes of the child-centered progressives we must clarify what Dewey meant by the "known." For the progressives, all that could be "known" were the child's everyday experiences. By restricting children to the known, they kept children from learning anything new. But Dewey's theory of experience tries to foster self-generating growth to help children to make new knowledge.

The child-centered progressives' pedagogy respected the child's nature but their overdependence on the child's knowledge as a major source for subject matter restricted the subject matter largely to "known" content, especially in the primary grades, and this limited access to new knowledge. Paradoxically, by over-emphasizing the child, they limited the child. Without new knowledge (in addition to what is "known"), the child cannot develop self-generating ways to make new knowledge. On the other hand, Dewey's theory of experience identifies the known of the child's everyday experiences with unknown subject matter, thus allowing for the optimum intersection of interaction and continuity to combine in "educative experiences." A school that is learning-centered can foster a philosophy that is neo-Deweyan which thrives in the "twilight zone of inquiry" (Dewey, 1916, p.148): the place created by the teacher where both subject matter and child connect, where knowing and not knowing intersect, where learners become a part of a self-perpetuating learning process.

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